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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal body, calls on the U.S. government to urge the government of Pakistan to put an end to vigilante violence and to provide adequate protection to human rights defenders in these turbulent times.

"It is the Pakistani government's iron-clad duty to ensure the safety of those who work tirelessly to defend human rights and religious freedom, as well as those seeking to exercise their internationally recognized rights including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie.

Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, this Commission has heard disturbing reports of politically connected armed groups harassing and threatening human rights defenders. This week, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that its chair, Asma Jahangir, had been threatened by gun-wielding men who had beaten a young man and physically harassed a group of young women including her daughter and locked them up in an office. The Human Rights Commission said that "the culprits seemed to enjoy local authorities' patronage and were reportedly backed by a couple of police constables in uniform."

In addition to her position as chair of the Human Rights Commission, Asma Jahangir is the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom calls for the Pakistani government to provide protection to her, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilani, and others who work to protect human rights in Pakistan.

This Commission also calls attention to the need to establish the rule of law in Pakistan. An essential component would be restoring the independence of the judiciary branch, as well as acting against extremist groups. The continued influence of armed groups that use violence in Pakistani politics and society has severely compromised rule of law and human rights for Pakistan's citizens, and has been particularly problematic when it comes to the internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of religion, expression, and association.

The Commission has long raised concerns about the ways in which the Pakistani government severely violates the right to religious freedom inside Pakistan. Abuses include the country's blasphemy laws, which commonly involve false accusations and result in the lengthy detention of and violence against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims on account of their religious beliefs; the laws violating the fundamental rights of the Ahmadi community; the persistent sectarian violence targeting Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians; and the Hudood ordinances, which violate the rights of women in Pakistan.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie